NIXON'S FINAL DAYS

On the next-to-last night of his Presidency, Richard Nixon summoned Henry Kissinger to the Lincoln Sitting Room in the White House. He had been caught in the last lies of Watergate, and had decided to quit. He was drinking when Kissinger found him. He broke into sobs as they talked. "We need to pray," he said suddenly, and the two men sank to their knees. Nixon beseeching his God aloud for help and rest and peace. Then, with Kissinger trying desperately to comfort him, the President sobbed, bent over, pounded the floor with his fist and curled on the carpet like a child.

The glimpse of a President at the end of his rope is from the new book by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, "The Final Days," excerpted for the first time in NEWSWEEK beginning with this issue (page 00) and scheduled for publication by Simon and Schuster in May. Its authors are the two young Washington Post reporters who first broke the story of high-level complicity in the Watergate scandals. Their new narrative of the decline and fall of the Nixon Presidency is drawn heavily from interviews with 394 participants, ranging from below-stairs at the White House to the most intimate Nixon family councils. It is principally an act of reporting, carefully unjudgmental in tone; its power instead lies in its camera-eye view of the state of Richard Nixon and his beleaguered Presidency in its last long slide from grace.

Nixon, in the Woodward-Bernstein rendering, was a man plainly unraveling under intolerable stress. He drank heavily, often starting in the afternoon with his chum Bebe Rebozo—and sometimes showing up late and dazed for work the morning after. He had trouble sleeping. He was given to bouts of gloom and storms of temper. His Secretary of State, Kissinger, said he was "like a madman" and worried that the world might blow up in his distracted last days. His chief of staff, Alexander Haig, likened him to Captain Queeg and quietly took over some Presidential decision-making from him. His family was deeply concerned for him: two days before the end, his son-in-law, Edward Cox, told U.S. Sen. Robert Griffin in a distraught phone call that Nixon had been up late "walking the halls . . . talking to pictures of former Presidents."

Worst of all, for Nixon's intimates, was the fear that he might commit suicide. Even in his last moment of triumph, on a June 1974 trip to Egypt, he seemed to some in his party to be courting death by phlebitis—or foolishly risking it by assassination. ("You can't protect a President who wants to kill himself," his chief Secret Service bodyguard told his doctor.) Cox expressed the family's secret fear for Nixon's life; so did son-in-law David Eisenhower, who doubted privately that the President would survive Watergate. Nixon himself verged on threatening suicide at the end, complaining to General Haig that the military had a way of dealing with such affairs—"Somebody leaves a pistol in the drawer"—but that he didn't even own a gun. Staffers were uncertain how seriously to take the hint; still, Haig was alarmed enough to order all of Nixon's sleeping pills and tranquilizers taken from him.

That Nixon in extremis should have sought comfort from Kissinger was itself a brutal irony: the Secretary, according to Woodward and Bernstein, regarded the President with carefully concealed loathing and contempt. The book's portrayal of Kissinger is at once scalding and monochromatic—a rendering that dwells far more on his prickly personality than on his record in foreign affairs. It pictures a Kissinger who regarded Nixon as a dangerous anti-Semite; who referred to him in full hearing of the office force as "our meatball President"; who once bounced a brilliantly written briefing paper on the ground that Nixon couldn't understand anything more recondite than a Reader's Digest article; who characterized Nixon as irrational, insecure, maniacal and a threat to U.S. foreign policy; who nevertheless flattered the President to his face, and served him until the end.

The book further details how Kissinger—even as he ridiculed Nixon's secret taping system—had all of his own office telephone calls monitored and transcribed. He started simply, with a secretary listening in and taking shorthand; eventually, the operation grew into a whole battery of hidden Dictabelt recorders that switched on automatically whenever he picked up the phone—even for a personal chat with his bride-to-be, Nancy Maginnes. The system was particularly elaborate when Nixon was on the line: Kissinger had eight extensions plugged into his direct wire to the President, so that not only his recorders but his aides could listen in. The Nixon-Kissinger talks accordingly became part of the office gossip—tales, for example, of how Nixon had rambled, or slurred his words, or made anti-black remarks, or once drunkenly offered Kissinger the advice of his friend Rebozo on military policy in Vietnam.

Kissinger's relations with his colleagues, according to the book, were likewise poisonous. He referred to senior Nixon staffers H.R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman as "idiots" and "Nazis";* Ehrlichman in turn suggested half jokingly that Kissinger was "queer." He taunted Haig, then his deputy, with cracks about military men being "dumb, stupid animals," and tried to block his promotion to courtier-in-chief to Nixon. He insulted his own staff academics as "bleeding hearts," among other epithets; he ragged one of them, William Watts, almost to the point of throwing a punch at Kissinger. (Kissinger ducked behind his desk, and Watts quit instead.) He took particular pleasure in humiliating Secretary of State William Rogers, the book relates—and ultimately pressured Nixon into giving him Rogers's job.

But it is the unmaking of a President that principally concerns Woodward and Bernstein—a process they track from the departure of Haldeman and Ehrlichman in April 1973 to Nixon's own resignation in August 1974. Nixon's first impulse in that long, bleak passage was to counterattack. He ordered up and got a list of wiretaps planted in the Kennedy-Johnson years, and read it with unconcealed pleasure; it included not only Martin Luther King Jr., as has been widely reported, but correspondents from NEWSWEEK and The New York Times, the French historian Bernard Fall, a House Agriculture committee staffer, a law firm with Dominican sugar clients, a CIA pal of President Kennedy's—and the author of a Marilyn Monroe biography suggesting a relationship between her and Robert Kennedy. Nixon pressed his people to leak the list, and backed off only on their insistence that it would look like a partisan cheapshot.

The President's men at first shared his central imperative—his own survival in office at whatever cost. But his lawyers began losing heart early on with the realization that he was hiding evidence even from them—and with the suspicion that he might have destroyed material that was under court subpoena. What concerned them particularly was the disappearance of an April 15, 1973, Dictabelt recording of Nixon's recollections of a meeting that day with his apostate staff counsel, John Dean. When White House lawyer J. Fred Buzhardt pressed Nixon for it, he replied: "Why can't we make a new Dictabelt?"

The lawyers were appalled; the suggestion alone could be read as an attempt to obstruct justice, and it put them along with the President in jeopardy. As early as November 1973, Buzhardt and his co-counsel Leonard Garment flew south to Nixon's retreat in Key Biscayne, Fla., to recommend that he resign. Haig cooled them with the observation that the then Vice President-designate Gerald Ford was not good enough to be President—

*Kissinger's mistrust of the two was understandable. Woodward and Bernstein report that he suspected they might steal his most sensitive papers. Kissinger accordingly shifted some of them to the Pocantico Hills estate of his patron Nelson Rockefeller—and called them back only on the advice of counsel that it was against the law to store classified material outside government facilities.

the lawyers did not disagree—refused even to see them. Garment subsequently dropped off the Watergate team, and Buzhardt dialed back from a defense posture of outraged innocence to what he called "the dilatory approach."

That approach worked until the Supreme Court's July 1974 decision against Nixon in the tapes case—a decision anonymously co-authored by Justice Potter Stewart, the book discloses, when Chief Justice Warren Burger proved unable to draft an adequate opinion by himself. Nixon flew into a fury at the verdict, threatening at one point to burn the tapes and resign rather than obey the court. His people soon discovered the source of his rage. That day, for the first time, Buzhardt heard the "smoking pistol" tape of June 23, 1972—the talk in which Nixon ordered the CIA used to impede the FBI investigation of Watergate. Six days later, during a council of war at Camp David, Nixon's senior staff ran their own extraordinary investigation of the President; they pieced together evidence that he had played the tape to himself three months before, had instantly squelched an out-of-court settlement that would have delivered it to the prosecutors—and had sat on his guilty secret ever since.

With that, his people abandoned his defense, moving instead to ease him from office—and to protect themselves in the process. Their task was to get through to a President they saw as unstable, exhausted and removed from the reality of his situation. Their strategy, inspired by speechwriter Pat Buchanan and embraced by Haig, was to force disclosure of the incriminating tape and allow the reaction to deliver a message they could not—that the time had come to stand down. "We suld step back and let the thing blow," Buchanan argued. "The President should feel the force of the blast himself."

The strategy succeeded, with some delicate orchestration by Haig. The general had grown concerned about his own role in the affair—about whether he had propped up an outlaw Presidency even as he tried to keep up the appearance of orderly government. Nixon was "guilty as hell," Haig snapped to a subordinate in the last days, and it fell to him to stage-manage Nixon's removal. He helped get the tape out, at one point threatening to quit if Nixon did not come clean. He quieted Republican demands for the President's resignation, since they seemed only to stiffen his resolve. Instead, he filtered through the worst possible assessments of Nixon's support on the Hill; once, with Nixon apparently listening in on an extension phone, he solicited Barry Goldwater's gloomy Senate head count—twelve votes for the President. He headed off a last, vaguely threatening appeal by Haldeman for a pardon; Ehrlichman tried too, by phone to Julie Eisenhower, with no better luck.

Nixon wavered for day[illegible] left without resources for hanging on; his support was gone, his staff in retreat, his own family divided and ravaged by Watergate. "The Final Days" is crowded with painful glimpses of the Nixons under siege:

■ **Pat Nixon** had been unhappy with Washington and the political life before Watergate: she had wanted to divorce Nixon after his losing 1962 run for governor of California, and their marriage thereafter had become a formalized, separate-bedroom affair. As the scandals engulfed Nixon, she supported his determination to fight. But she too was distraught and depressed, and she too began drinking heavily.

■ **Julie and David** found their own marriage strained by Watergate, and by Julie's uncritical last-ditch defense of her father. David blamed her emotional commitment to the battle for the tubal pregnancy she suffered early in 1974. His own reaction was escape, into long hours over table games such as Diplomacy and APBA baseball; he even considered re-upping in the Navy. In the last family councils, the couple came near open collision, David consumed by his doubts—and Julie by her singlehanded effort to flog her father's staff and family into line behind him.

■ **Tricia and Ed Cox** were not immune to the stresses. In discussions with the family and the White House staff in the final weeks, Cox counseled against a hasty resignation over the June 23 tape. But in his rattled phone call to Senator Griffin, he said that he and David thought Nixon had to quit. Their problem was that Tricia and Julie had closed their minds to argument. "I can't talk to my wife," said Cox. "She is determined that her father shall not resign."

For all of them, in the Woodward-Bernstein chronicle, the final days became a kind of death watch—a painful passage waiting for Nixon to understand that he had no option left except to resign. He veered dizzyingly between deciding to go and resolving to stay. He maundered on about going to prison, remarking to Garment at one point that there are "worse things . . . There is no telephone there. There is, instead, peace. A hard table to write on." He wept and prayed with Kissinger, then begged him never to tell anyone the tale. He agonized toward his decision with his family but reached it alone, sending his secretary, Rose Mary Woods, to reveal it to his own daughters. He mustered some last reserve of calm for his formal announcement, then made his last farewells in a speech so maudlin that David thought he might crack up on live TV. The final days were over. Richard Nixon was gone.

—PETER GOLDMAN